

ELEANOR.

A Tale of Non-Performers.

However, she was too happy to be quarrelsome. The dear boys! She followed their gray figures with her eyes until they were lost to view; and before night she was crowned with full content; for she had assured herself that her only source of anxiety was groundless. The master of Blatchworth had still a heart to offer.

He had actually arrived at her door, hale, hearty, and disengaged; and at the end of her solemn exhortation on the duty of remaining so no longer, professed himself inclined to see it in the same light.

And she had surely extended some of her sisterly cares to Noll. It was disgraceful if Noll did not turn into a Benedict now that he had got that fifteen hundred pounds out of Aunt Maria. What could a fellow like Noll do with fifteen hundred pounds?

"For heaven's sake, Cis," cried the careful elder brother, "get him a wife, or he'll go to the devil with it!"

"Hush, hush! you must not talk like that."

"I didn't mean," said Anthony, penitently. "I say, one gets into a rough way of talking, knocking about the world. Don't you mind, I'm going to stop it."

"And you are not going to knock about the world any more?"

Then she bargained that they should go over with her to call at the Castle on the following day. Two days after, shooting would begin, and hours would be changed, and who could say when the acquaintance might be made if not at once; but once seen, she trusted to the fair sisterhood acting as their own magnet in the future. But what a time that short intervening two miles took to get over with such companions, and how hot and tired was weary Cecil at the end!

That they started late, that they kept her waiting for three-quarters of an hour, was nothing; she was good-naturedly disposed to lay the blame on the change of toilet which a morning's fishing rendered imperative; but why need they lounge and saunter and turn aside at every opportunity and finally sit down to rest by the way—the two great hulking fellows? It was but too obvious that they were being driven against their will—that that had not been their first day, and there was no excuse handy, they would have evaded the expedition. Oliver sends off after a rabbit, Anthony cheering him on; they investigate a well, the drink from a spring; finally both leave her to examine a blasted piece of rock half-way up the hill.

At length, however, and by dint of patience and urgency combined, the entrance gates are reached, and the toils of their journey are at an end. So she hopes fondly—but stay a bit.

"I say, Cis."

"Well?"

"Anthony and I are just going down the shore to see about getting a fisherman for to-night. Anthony never seen the kind of sea-fishing they have here. You go on and we will overtake you."

"Overtake me! We are now close at hand."

"Go in, then, and say we are coming."

And come they did—after every one had gone out but Eleanor. The visit was a failure. After an hour's waiting, Eleanor, not without some sense of outraged dignity, had sent her sisters away, and intrenched herself in solitary state to receive the recusants. Her pretty goods should not remain for such tardy appreciation, should not have it supposed that the enforced civility of any guests of Cecil's—brothers or not—was grateful to them. She had the color on her cheek and the sparkle in her eye when the drawing-room door opened at last; and her answer to Oliver's hasty quest round the room, was a grim smile of satisfaction.

For Oliver, now that he was actually there, was alive to the merits of the situation; and he had, moreover, caught a glimpse of an excellent croquet-lawn—the days of croquet were not yet ended—as he passed through the shrubbery; it was enough to kindle desire. He was a renowned player, as he was everything else that was useful and captivating, and if he could have got Anthony, even for an antagonist, would have challenged him on the spot.

But it appeared that Anthony had not only never played it, he had actually never seen the game.

However, the players kept him to his word. It is to be presumed that he tried to learn; that he did seriously incline his ear to the counsels of the wise; but he made a sad hash of it, nevertheless. So much was taken for granted; so many points he expected to bear in mind at once; and such a number of rules and regulations were dinned into his ear at the same time, that he must be pardoned for giving up the attempt, and retreating in mortification to the old-fashioned sundial among the bushes, where Eleanor was mounting guard.

From this retreat he viewed the combatants with no very good will. They had speedily—and he fancied joyfully—rearranged sides; and he could tell by the general alacrity and expectation, the preparatory collecting of ball and testing of hoops, the whole stir and bustle consequent on his departure, that a well contested match was to be played. He was no lads—indeed, he must have been an intolerable drag. His going admitted another sister to play, and enabled all to let out their strength and show their skill.

Altogether he was well out of it. Away went Oliver, carrying with him his partner, Kate, from right to left, from center to side, clearing the route of all opponents' balls, and placing them delicately for future use, in the style of a master of the craft. It seemed as though he were to walk the course; but he slipped, missed an easy stroke, and in a trice the tables were turned.

It was now his turn to be chased from hole to corner by an unsparing foe; and to find himself and his fair partner at

extreme ends of the lawn, hopelessly disunited. So much for Julia, but Kate could play too. A lucky shot regained, and as if by magic, the lost position and cleared the coast. Why should her slender fingers have trembled at that critical moment? Pure eagerness, not even anxiety, made them; she was not nervous by nature, and she was confident in herself, but she was excited, and the mallet turned in her hand. If she had not touched, no mischief would have been done; but, oh, woe betide the tiresome thing! it moved the ball, and made the abortive attempt count as a stroke.

The adversaries shouted, and the striker stood still; but Oliver rushed to the rescue. By turns appealing, quoting, arguing, he maintained his position until the others had gathered round; and the merry voices rose and fell by turns, interspersed with soft and joyous laughter.

So gay they seemed that "It is a nuisance to be out of it altogether," reflected the elder. "Makes a fellow feel rather small."

Then he essayed to explain to Eleanor how it came to pass that he was so ignorant.

"I have not been in this country for six years; and though I have heard of this, I never ran across any people who played."

"You will find a rage for it everywhere this summer."

"Oh, I shall play, I suppose; I shall get into it by and by. Are you a great hand?"

"I? Oh, no," said Eleanor, with a faint smile. "I know no more of it than you do."

Unexpected consolation. He raised himself on his elbow to look into her face.

"You don't say so!"

"I like to come here while they are playing, and listen to their voices, and have them all about me," continued the elder sister in her hen-motherly fashion; "it makes a pretty sight; and it is such good exercise for the girls."

"Meantime you read?"

"Yes."

"May I look? Coleridge. That's odd."

"Odd! said Eleanor, warmly. "Odd to read Coleridge!"

"Odd that you should be reading the 'Ancient Mariner,' just when I fancied myself to be like him."

"Oh—? Indeed—?"

"Behindhand with the world. Not 'in it,' as they say on the turf. Rather a fool, you know."

"Because you can not play croquet?"

"Pshaw!" said Anthony, shortly. "You will find there are other things I can not do besides that."

"And do you really mind?"

"I am not sure if I do, or not. I hate the thing; but, you see, if all the rest are at it—"

She thought she understood, and was not ill-pleased.

Naturally he did not enjoy being left out in the cold; and she did her best to restore his self-complacency under the ordeal; and then at last Puss and Dot were tired of being umpires, and came to join the idlers. That did better, and they all went into the house shortly, and candle; were brought in, and there was music.

It was evident that Oliver was destined to shine as much at the piano as on the lawn. Cecil, who had enjoyed her croquet, being as good a player as any, now retreated to the sofa and the society of her father-in-law; but Oliver was again in the front ranks of the performers. He had a sweet rich voice, the very voice to go with Kate's clear soprano, and duets were chosen.

"Awfully nice, is it not?" said Anthony, presently; but somehow he did not look as though he found it so; he was frowning and silent, and the cheek which he rested against the soft cushion of his chair was turned from the singers.

"I say," called his brother, probably in obedience to a suggestion, "Anthony, come and take a part."

"Take a part! No, thank you, I can not."

Take a part, indeed! He had never taken a part in his life! Talking of taking "a part" as coolly as though it were taking a header or a fence!

He laughed, but his laughter was rather unwhimsical; and there was a momentary silence.

"It is a pity," said Cecil to herself; "but to be sure, he can listen; and really one can enjoy and admire, too, a great deal better when one has nothing else to do, than when one has one's own business to attend to. Kate is in capital voice; and they are all looking their best."

"It is not delightful, Anthony?"

"Oh, delightful!"

"Don't you like being sung to?"

"Awfully."

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

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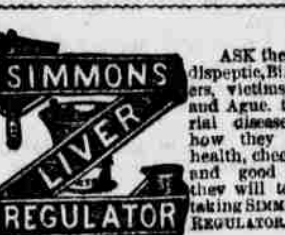
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